

Ecology as Metaphor: Sauer and Human Ecology

First, a speculative note on origins. It is possible that a draft of an article I wrote in 1976–1977 for the *American Behavioral Scientist* [3] provided a kind of goad to John Leighly to write about Sauer and human ecology. Alternatively, he may have recently completed his paper on “Ecology as Metaphor” when Jim Parsons passed along a copy of my paper. In any event, Leighly wrote some characteristically sharp and insightful comments to Parsons, who kindly sent them along to me. Leighly characterized then recent work in human ecology reviewed in my own 1978 paper as “recent flounderings in geography” [2] and “found it astonishing that ideas about environmental perception, cognition, the importance of culture, and an anthropological viewpoint should be discussed as new developments when they [had] been taken for granted at Berkeley for 50 years” [3, p. 30]. I was proposing the historical development of two separate schools of American geography in the period from the mid-1920s to the mid-1950s, a Midwestern school and a California school. Indeed, Leighly provides support for this idea in citing Sauer’s rejection of much of his training at the University of Chicago and Sauer’s own comment that his move from the University of Michigan to Berkeley was “to get away from what geographers mainly were doing in the East” [1, p. 2].

One cannot do scholarly research on everything. Sauer concentrated on the non-industrial, rural, non-western world, on the past, and on the theme of human influence on environment. He, together with many of his contemporaries, was quite wary of the environmental determinist’s exploration of environmental effects on human activity. He was less concerned with economic and social relations of contemporary populations; he did not develop systematically any comprehensive view of the world’s political economy as a system. He pursued those themes which interested him most.

Leighly’s presentation, based on a thorough understanding of Sauer’s writings and familiarity with his correspondence, contributes greatly to our understanding of Sauer’s views of geography’s method and scope. Sauer found the term “human ecology,” which to him implied “a mechanical explanation of human actions,” too limited; it omitted the cultural origins of human action and failed to include the “moral responsibility” which humankind uniquely bears in relation to environment [1, p. 4]. Given that view, it is somewhat ironic that Sauer, and Leighly too, would find the term useful, if at all, in modern times as a metaphor of human duty toward environment.

Human ecology means different things to scholars in different disciplines: urban sociologists, home economists, anthropologists, geographers, ecologists and biologists. Perhaps the ultimate misappropriation of the term is associated with the Society for the Investigation of Human Ecology, a front organization funded until the mid-1960s by the Central Intelligence Agency [4]. Given its checkered history, human ecology will likely continue as an ambiguous, imprecise term for a varying set of relationships among people and environment. It is doubtful that scholarly usage will converge on the metaphorical meaning Leighly would give it in our contemporary world.

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1. Leighly, John. “Ecology as Metaphor: Carl Sauer and Human Ecology.” *Professional Geographer*, 39 (1987).
2. ———. Personal Communication to J.J. Parsons, 12 May 1978.
3. Porter, Philip W. “Geography as Human Ecology: A Decade of Progress in a Quarter Century.” *American Behavioral Scientist*, 22:(1) (1978) 15–39.
4. “Recruiting by CIA Tied to Youth Camps.” *Minneapolis Tribune*, October 12, 1977.